

# PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE SHARE THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF CURRENT EVENTS

**Singapore** | 14 June 2016

---

## **What Does Indonesia's *Pribumi* Elite Think of Ethnic Chinese Today?**

*By Johannes Herlijanto\**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Negative views of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia have been on the decline in the last two decades. The situation seems to have changed, however, and today, perceptions of this group are mixed and complicated.
- Complaints about the ubiquity of the Chinese culture have been apparent among members of the pribumi elite, as is resistance against the participation of Chinese Indonesians in politics. Some members of this elite seem even to suspect that there is an organized effort by the ethnic Chinese to gain prominence in politics.
- Negative sentiments against ethnic Chinese are believed to be rooted in a fear that they would impose economic, cultural, and political domination on the pribumi majority. Today, there is apprehension that such domination will come through the establishment of a political and economic alliance between ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, Indonesian bureaucrats, and China.
- But while some may hold negative sentiments about ethnic Chinese, there are many who continue to have a sympathetic view, and see the Chinese as Indonesians who should be treated the same way as their countrymen.

\* Johannes Herlijanto is an Associate Fellow with the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

## INTRODUCTION

On 4 April 2016, a large group calling itself the Jakarta Community Movement (GMJ) demonstrated outside the city hall of Jakarta. The rally was one of many events organized in recent months by various groups with a similar goal: the resignation of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) from his position as Governor of the Indonesian capital, or at the very least, his defeat in the next gubernatorial election. The reasons may be varied, but the allegation that the policies adopted by this ethnic Chinese governor benefit only ethnic Chinese tycoons at the expense of poor Jakartans – many of whom are ‘pribumi’ (indigenous) Indonesians – has become one of the dominant narratives in the movement against Ahok.<sup>1</sup>

While it is resentment against wealthy Chinese Indonesians that is being used in the movement against Ahok, this nevertheless indicates the reemergence of a negative perception of this ethnic minority as a whole. This development is all the more significant when one considers that this bias against Chinese Indonesians had been in decline in the last decade due to a combination of reasons including the promotion of multiculturalism, the government’s decision to abolish discriminatory laws and regulations, and efforts made by Chinese Indonesians to improve their image and position in Indonesian society.

Today, negative views of ethnic Chinese are proliferating again. Messages warning pribumi Indonesians of domination by various groups of Chinese (including migrants from China) have been circulating widely in social media in the last few months. The same theme is also apparent in many discussion forums held regularly by various groups of political activists.<sup>2</sup>

This phenomenon evokes several questions: how similar or different are the current negative perceptions of ethnic Chinese compared to the ones that existed in the past? Does recent developments in Sino-Indonesia relations play a role in the shaping of these perceptions? What has happened to the more sympathetic atmosphere seen at the beginning of the post-Suharto era? This article is a pilot attempt to address these questions, and will focus specifically on those who may be categorized as the pribumi elite.<sup>3</sup>

## OLD STEREOTYPES, NEW SUSPICIONS

Current sentiments against ethnic Chinese are to a certain extent based on stereotypes that have been bandied around since before the New Order, such as the portrayal of this ethnic group as the descendants of people originating from a foreign country who have a questionable political loyalty to Indonesia but who dominate the country’s economy despite

---

<sup>1</sup> Despite its contested meaning, the term ‘pribumi’ is used in this article in order to be consistent with the majority of my informants who use it to refer to the native peoples of the archipelago.

<sup>2</sup> Examples of these in Jakarta are the ‘Rakyat Bergerak’ (People in Motion), a weekly informal gathering led by Dr. Sri-Bintang Pamungkas, a forum of discussion organized by a group called ‘the Pribumi Front’ (not to be confused with the newly founded ‘Pribumi Party’), and a weekly gathering held by the Forum of Islamic Socialist Network (ForJIS).

<sup>3</sup> The term ‘elite’ in this article is defined broadly to include, among others, politicians (including less high profile ones), entrepreneurs, prominent scholars, leaders of mass organizations, retired and active military officers, top level government officials, as well as leaders of NGOs.

their status as a minority (Coppel, 1983; Aditjondro 1998). Public expression of these sentiments saw a ‘steady decline’ in the mid-1990s – already prior to the 1997 Asian financial crisis – as a result of the growing confidence of the Indonesian middle class (Heryanto, 1998). Since the beginning of the *reformasi* era, more sympathetic views of Chinese Indonesians, who were seen by many as the main victims of the May 1998 riots, have become popular alongside the adoption of a series of more accommodative policies toward this group by post-New Order governments (Herlijanto, 2013). Hence, the reemergence of anti-Chinese sentiments in Indonesian public sphere, and especially among members of the elite, deserves special attention.

Such sentiments are apparent among varied groups of the pribumi elite. They include leaders of several Islamic organizations, nationalists who harbour suspicions against foreign powers (in their words, *asing* [foreign] and *aseng* [a Chinese name, referring to China and the ethnic Chinese]), and some in elite circles who were already in mid-career in the last years of the Suharto era.

The negative sentiments found among these groups seem rooted in a fear of the economic, cultural, and political domination that the ethnic Chinese may impose on the ‘pribumi’ majority. Heightened cultural expressions and the political participation of ethnic Chinese are among the concerns that these members of the elite often mention. Both of these are a result of the aforementioned accommodative policies of the post-Suharto period, combined with the increasing tolerant atmosphere that appeared in the aftermath of the May 1998 Riots.

As implied in an interview with a leader of a large Islamic organization, this sympathy that the pribumi elite has encouraged for roughly two decades has reached a limit.<sup>4</sup> In his opinion, this is in response to the economic and political behaviour of the Chinese Indonesian elite. This may be further understood as a reaction against a phenomenon that some scholars call ‘resinization’ (Hoon, 2008; Setijadi 2016).

Already in 2012, Professor A. Dahana, a senior historian and sinologist from the University of Indonesia, raised his concerns regarding a backlash against the ‘over-celebration’ of Chinese cultural identity. While a large-scale protest against this cultural celebration is not observable yet, complaints about the ubiquity of Chinese culture have been apparent in less publicized conversations and discussions among the pribumi elite. In an interview, a senior expert in Indonesian politics and security revealed that he regarded the frequent appearance of the lion dance and other forms of Chinese culture to be an intimidation of pribumi communities.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, a leader of the Syarikat Islam, a Muslim organization established in the second decade of the twentieth century, resented what he saw as the overexposure of Chinese culture.<sup>6</sup> The tendency among some ethnic Chinese to keep identifying themselves

---

<sup>4</sup> In an interview with me, the General Secretary of a large Islamic organization explained how he had had full sympathy for the Chinese in the aftermath of the May 1998 riots, but was now disappointed with Chinese tycoons, which he was tempted to agree with the popular conclusion that ‘once a Chinese, always a Chinese’ (Interview with the Muslim leader, Tangerang, 11 April 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Interview with a senior expert in Indonesian politics and security, Jakarta 29 February 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Personal conversation with Mr. Nur Lapong, a leader of the Syarikat Islam and ForJIS, Jakarta 28 April 2016.

as victims has also induced an unpleasant response from some elite pribumi Indonesians.<sup>7</sup> In their view, such an identification contradicts the fact that many years after Indonesia entered the *reformasi* era, the ethnic Chinese continue to enjoy a dominant position in the economy, as they did during the New Order period, and to have prominence in the country's politics.

More than the expression of Chinese cultural identity, it is the political participation of Chinese Indonesians that is hotly and frequently discussed by the pribumi elite groups. Resistance against ethnic Chinese attempts to gain significant political positions is clearly observable, and this should be understood in light of the argument that 70 percent of the Indonesian economy is in the hands of the Chinese, an argument which President Suharto himself already publicised in 1968 in a talk in Tokyo (Suryadinata, 1992). This 'Myth of Chinese Domination' became popular again almost three decades later, following a statement made by an Australian analyst, Michael Backman, who stated that "Sino-Indonesians control approximately 73 per cent of listed firms by market capitalization" (Aditjondro, 1998). Whatever the case, despite the economic power that some of them have, the ethnic Chinese in general were kept as a 'politically weak minority' under the New Order government.

But a different picture has emerged today. In the mind of many pribumi Indonesians, the ethnic Chinese today have managed to free themselves from their 'economically strong but politically weak' status, and are viewed to be making an organized effort to become an economically and politically prominent group. Evidence used to support this view usually includes the political achievement made by some Chinese Indonesian politicians, such as Hasan Karman (former mayor of Singkawang), Christiandy Sanjaya (the vice governor of the West Kalimantan), Ahok, and his younger brother, Basuri Tjahaja Purnama (former regent of the East Belitung). Ahok's wish to contest in Jakarta's next gubernatorial election, his dream of becoming president of Indonesia,<sup>8</sup> as well as Hary Tanoesoedibjo and his political party's preparation to contest in the next nationwide general elections,<sup>9</sup> are popularly cited examples of Chinese eagerness to advance politically.

A popular view is that 'after dominating Indonesian economy, the Chinese are now attempting to dominate Indonesian politics as well.' Statements to that effect are frequently dropped during interviews or conversations that the author has conducted with members of

---

<sup>7</sup> I learned about the presence of such a response among the pribumi elite from information given by a top government official who formerly headed a government institution with a task to supervise and consolidate national unity (Interview, 12 January 2016).

<sup>8</sup> The first time I heard the issue regarding Ahok's wish to become the future president of Indonesia was during a lunch meeting with, among others, a well-known pribumi businessman and a retired one-star general on 2 April 2016. Lieutenant General (retired) Suryo Prabowo also mentioned it at an event organized by the Front Pribumi on 9 May 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Hary Tanoesoedibjo (popularly known as Hary Tanoë) is the CEO of the MNC group, a large group of media companies. He is also the founder and chairperson of the Indonesian Unity Party (Perindo).

the pribumi elite.<sup>10</sup> Specifically among those who are against Ahok,<sup>11</sup> his recent political success as well as his current political maneuvers are believed to be a part of a larger strategy designed by the ethnic Chinese for domination of other Indonesians. In the view of Ismail Yusanto, a top leader of the Islamic organization, Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), the strategy is implemented in three different steps—while the ethnic Chinese during the New Order period used their close relationship with the ruling elite to influence the decision-making process, in the *reformasi* era, they have adopted two different strategies, that is, ‘owning’ the country’s ruling elites by becoming their financiers, and making an attempt to become the rulers themselves.<sup>12</sup>

The image of political and economic domination of Indonesia by the ethnic Chinese is strong among members of the pribumi elite due several phenomena which, if interpreted in a certain way, provide compelling evidence for their belief. Apart from the political maneuvers of Chinese Indonesian politicians, there are also the issues of ethnic Chinese tycoon behavior, and recent developments in Sino-Indonesia relations. With regards to ethnic Chinese tycoons, attention is given to their attempts to strengthen business networks in collaboration with ethnic Chinese businessmen from other countries. By way of example, Mochtar Riady, a senior Chinese Indonesian tycoon, reportedly invited Chinese entrepreneurs from all over the world to invest their money in three different fields in Indonesia: property, infrastructures, and mining. The invitation was announced during the 13<sup>th</sup> conference of the World Chinese Entrepreneurs Convention organized in Bali in September 2015. While the invitation might have been motivated by a wish to boost Indonesian economic growth, it was heard with alarm by some members of the pribumi elite. As suggested by the executive director of an independent think tank organization, the invitation may be interpreted as a call to ‘colonize’ the Indonesian economy in these three fields.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, property building and the possession of land by ethnic Chinese are two related issues that have become central to the discourse regarding the domination of Indonesia by the ethnic Chinese. Dr. Sri Bintang Pamungkas, a well-known scholar and politician who is popular for his courage to criticize Suharto in early 1990s, discussed the possession of a large amount of land in Bandung and many other West Java cities by the descendants of an ethnic Chinese businessman.<sup>14</sup> He also expressed concern regarding the plan of a group of ethnic Chinese businessman, including the Riady family, to build a port and other facilitating infrastructures in Cirebon, because it would allow the city to be dominated by the Chinese, as Bandung already is.

---

<sup>10</sup> The statement was declared, for instance, by Sri-Bintang Pamungkas during a discussion forum held in 2 May 2016. It also appeared in my interview with Ahmad Wijaya, a close aide to the former chairperson of the Front of Islamic Defense (FPI) (Jakarta 12 May 2016).

<sup>11</sup> It should be clarified that not all of members of the elite who express concern about the political and economic domination by ethnic Chinese are against Ahok’s plan to compete in the next gubernatorial election. Instead, some of them are actually supporters of Ahok.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Ismail Yusanto, Jakarta, 24 March 2016.

<sup>13</sup> This kind of interpretation was raised in a forum of discussion entitled ‘The need for Indonesia to Identify Its Geopolitical Position,’ Jakarta, 3 December 2015.

<sup>14</sup> The discussion took place in a weekly gathering called the *Rakyat Bergerak* (People in Motion), Jakarta 2 May 2016.

The fear of domination by the Chinese has become more widespread in recent years. It also builds on the suspicion that a large number of Chinese from Mainland China will migrate to Indonesia, and hence swell the ranks of ethnic Chinese already in this country. This suspicion began to appear in late May 2015, following a statement made by China's Vice Premier, Madam Liu Yandong, during her visit to Jakarta. Madam Liu's declaration that China would further promote its relations with Indonesia through people-to-people exchanges, incited concern about a massive arrival of Chinese migrants to Indonesia.<sup>15</sup> For some groups of pribumi elite, these migrants may also be very rich.

In a message circulated through his twitter, Nazaruddin Sjamsuddin, a former chairperson of the General Election Commission (KPU) promoted his view that Ahok's policies, which according to him have significantly increased living costs in Jakarta, would make the economically weak residents of the city (many of whom are pribumis) leave. Jakarta would in turn be dominated not only by Chinese Indonesians, but also by Chinese from other parts of the world, including China.<sup>16</sup> While the message was already circulating in late January 2016, the explanation began to gain credibility later in April 2016, after the project of land reclamation in the Bay of Jakarta came to public attention. The suspicion that the properties on the artificial islands would be sold to Mainland Chinese became widespread, especially after the circulation of a Mandarin version of the advertisement for an apartment and shopping complex that will be built on one of those islands.

But Jakarta is only one of the regions that in the view of some members of the pribumi elite are potentially dominated by the Chinese. The good relationship between the current Indonesian government and China has enabled the latter to invest in several large infrastructure projects in several parts of this country. While most of these are conducted in collaboration with the Indonesian government or state-owned companies, they are believed to benefit ethnic Chinese businessmen who may be regarding these projects as an opportunity to expand their property businesses by building apartment or shopping complexes near the area where the projects are undertaken. The Bandung-Jakarta high speed train project is one of the examples often mentioned. This project is funded through a loan from China Development Bank, and is going to be constructed by China Railway International Co. Ltd. Rumors that a large amount of land close to several spots in the train network is in the possession of an ethnic Chinese tycoon, have led some to imagine the role played by the tycoon when the plan to conduct the project was designed.<sup>17</sup> In short, the fear of the ethnic Chinese domination of Indonesia includes the suspicion of an alliance between the ethnic Chinese, the Indonesian bureaucrats (including certain pribumi bureaucrats) and China. In this 'imagined conspiracy', both the government and the people of the new superpower are seen to be playing several different roles, from buyers of properties,

---

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, <http://pribuminews.com/29/05/2015/10-juta-warga-negara-cina-akan-migrasi-massal-ke-indonesia-pribumi-tersingkir/> (accessed on 30 May 2016).

<sup>16</sup> 'Prof. Nazaruddin: Jika Ahok Jadi Gubernur Lagi, Jakarta Akan Dikuasai Cina Dengan Menyingkirkan Pribumi,' <http://www.eramuslim.com/berita/analisa/prof-nazaruddin-jika-ahok-jadi-gubernur-lagi-jakarta-akan-dikuasai-cina-dengan-menyingkirkan-pribumi.htm> (accessed on 16 May 2016).

<sup>17</sup> This rumor was raised, for instance, by a participant of a discussion forum organized by the ForJIS, Jakarta 13 May 2016.

financiers of infrastructure projects, to being a foreign power that can have significant influence on Chinese Indonesian politicians.<sup>18</sup>

## **INCLUSIVE VIEWS OF THE ETHNIC CHINESE**

The picture painted so far should not lead us to believe that tolerant and sympathetic views of the ethnic Chinese minority are absent. To be sure, ordinary ethnic Chinese are to some extent often seen as a group of people separate from ethnic Chinese tycoons and politicians. It is the latter group, or more specifically, a segment of the latter group, which are considered the antagonists. As Sri-Bintang Pamungkas often emphasizes, what he and his group oppose is the “Chinese mafia”.

Furthermore, many of those who are critical of the ethnic Chinese nevertheless feel that some ethnic Chinese are better than others in term of their Indonesian nationalism. For example, a former Ambassador who had had concerns about ethnic Chinese informed me how in recent months he had been working with a group of Chinese Indonesians who did not only prove their Indonesian nationalism, but also actively encouraged others to become good Indonesians by highlighting the need to do business honestly and lawfully.<sup>19</sup>

It should also be noted that there are many members of the pribumi elite who have sympathetic and inclusive views of the ethnic Chinese. Most believe that Chinese Indonesians are first and foremost Indonesians. The evidence they cite to support the belief varies, from heroic actions that the ethnic Chinese did in the past for Indonesia, to the identity construction of the Chinese Indonesians, which is usually based on Indonesia or some region in Indonesia. In the view of Guspiabri Sumowigeno, a member of the Central Board of the National Democratic Party (Nasdem), the latter is compelling evidence of the successful assimilation/acculturation process that has been taking place for several generations.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, members of the pribumi elite often regard Rear Admiral John Lie, an ethnic Chinese who served with the Indonesian Navy soon after the establishment of the Republic of Indonesia, as an example of a Chinese Indonesian who participated in the country’s struggle for independence. His name was mentioned by some of the senior officers of the Indonesian Armed Forces whom I interviewed.<sup>21</sup>

What leaders of NGOs and workers’ unions think on the subject is also of great interest. Some of them not only have a sympathetic view of the ethnic Chinese but also wish for their deeper involvement in their movements. As Arif Nur Alam, a leader of a group of NGOs calling themselves ‘Nawacita Coalition’, declared, he and his colleagues “are proud and ready to give support if a Chinese Indonesian is willing to become a leader, because such

---

<sup>18</sup> The concern that ethnic Chinese politicians may be influenced by Beijing to serve their interest was expressed by a retired one-star general in an informal conversation during lunch on 2 April 2016. In addition, Sri-Bintang Pamungkas also showed his suspicion that certain ethnic Chinese politicians have a connection with Beijing in an informal discussion held on 2 May 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with a former ambassador, 17 January 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Guspiabri Sumowigeno, Jakarta 24 March 2016.

<sup>21</sup> For example, interview with a senior Navy officer (7 March 2016), and with a senior Air Force officer who holds a high ranking position at the National Defense Council (Wantanas) (8 March 2016).

participation will contribute to a better democratic atmosphere in Indonesia.”<sup>22</sup> In fact, the presence of an ethnic Chinese within a certain movement helps to neutralise the ethnic issue. As a young worker union leader has observed, many workers do not have negative sentiments against ethnic Chinese because there are quite a few ethnic Chinese in the union and who are activists as well. While he admitted that resentment toward individual Chinese Indonesians might exist, the basis was more on their status as employer or representative of the company, rather than on their ethnic background.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, the government elite’s perception of the ethnic Chinese is also important to observe. In this regard, an article recently published by General (retired) Luhut Pandjaitan, the Coordinating Minister for the Politics, Law, and Security, may be a good example. Titled ‘Do the Pribumi and Non Pribumi Still Exist’?,<sup>24</sup> the article argues that the categorization of the ethnic Chinese as the non pribumi is no longer acceptable, because Chinese Indonesians are a part of Indonesia and therefore should be treated like other Indonesians. The view that Chinese Indonesians should not be regarded as a problem anymore also appeared during my interviews with several government officials, including military officers. For example, Mrs. Ina Krisnamurthi, a top official in the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stated that the ethnic difference between Chinese Indonesians and other ethnic groups in the country was not a source of concern anymore.<sup>25</sup> For this Javanese lady, the Chinese Indonesians are as Indonesian as she is. ‘We already moved on from this ethnic issue, we should move on,’ she declared. Similarly, a senior Army officer also said that he supported the freedom of expression as well as political participation of the ethnic Chinese. Interestingly, he also used the words ‘move on’ while explaining his view that many Indonesians today did not see the ethnic difference between the Chinese Indonesians and the pribumi as a problem.<sup>26</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The perception of ethnic Chinese among members of the pribumi Indonesian elite is not uniform. While some segments of the pribumi elite hold a negative view of Chinese Indonesians, others tend to have more tolerant and sympathetic attitudes toward this minority group. The latter tend to feel that Chinese Indonesians are Indonesians and hence should be treated equally. However, the recent circulation of negative sentiments is worth special attention. To what extent this fear haunts the wider pribumi communities is a question that we need to study further.

---

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Arif Nur Alam, Jakarta 5 March 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Johannes Dartha Pakpahan, Jakarta 12 March 2016.

<sup>24</sup> <http://forum.viva.co.id/indeks/threads/masih-adakah-pribumi-dan-nonpribumi.1999799/> (accessed on 17 May 2016)

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Mrs. Ina Krisnamurthi, Jakarta, 1 March 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with a senior Army officer, Jakarta 19 April 2016.

***List of References***

- Aditjondro, G. (1998). Indonesia: The Myth of Chinese Domination. The Jakarta Post, 14 August.
- Coppel, C. A. (1983). *Indonesian Chinese in Crisis*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.
- Herlijanto, J. (2013). *Emulating China: Representation of China and the Contemporary Critique of Indonesia*. (Doctor of Philosophy), Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam.
- Heryanto, A. (1998). Ethnic Identity and Erasure: Chinese Indonesians in Public Culture. In J. S. Khan (Ed.), *Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and the Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand.*, 95-114. Singapore: ISEAS.
- Hoon, C. Y. (2008). *Chinese Identity in Post-Suharto Indonesia: Culture, Politics and Media*. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press.
- Setijadi, C. (2016). Ethnic Chinese in Contemporary Indonesia: Changing Identity Politics and the Paradox of Sinification. *ISEAS Perspective*, 12.
- Suryadinata, L. (1992). *Pribumi Indonesians, the Chinese Minority, and China*, Third Edition. Singapore: Heinemann Asia.

<p>ISEAS Perspective is published electronically by:</p> <p>ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute 30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace Pasir Panjang Singapore 119614</p> <p>Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955 Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735</p>	<p>ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed.</p> <p>Responsibility rests exclusively with the individual author or authors. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission.</p> <p>Comments are welcome and may be sent to the author(s).</p> <p>© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each article.</p>	<p>Editorial Chairman: Tan Chin Tiong Managing Editor: Ooi Kee Beng</p> <p>Editors: Lee Poh Onn and Benjamin Loh</p> <p>Assistant Editors: Vandana Prakash Nair, Veena Nair and Michael Yeo Chai Ming</p>
--	---	---